



# Lalita Tademy

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*You only have one family, and not everybody gets that. Think about where you want to put trust. Reaching too deep into something not meant for you is full of pain. Figure out what you can have and work on that. You only get one family.*

— Cane River

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## Biography

The youngest of four children, Tademy was born in Berkeley, California in 1948 to Nathan Green Tademy, Jr. and Willie Dee Billes. As an African American family living in primarily white neighborhoods the Tademys often felt the brunt of racial hostility. Frequent death threats and other racially motivated aggression forced the family to move a number of times throughout the 1950's. People often spit at Tademy as she walked to school. At times, she feared for her life. Because of this fear Tademy developed an intense determination to succeed. She said of her childhood, “[It] had a great influence in making me very determined to be independent and listen to my own voice” (interview with Lalita Tademy, Oprah.com).

In 1956, the family moved to Castro Valley, California, where Tademy completed her elementary, junior high, and high school education. Upon graduating from high school as a National Merit Scholar, Tademy enrolled in the honors program at Howard University in Washington D.C. Despite having a full academic scholarship, she left Howard University after two years to pursue more challenging coursework at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1948
- \* African-American novelist and former business executive
- \* Author of *Cane River* and *Red River*

This page was researched and submitted by Carrie Stewart, Jana Kosanovich, and Kristina Krohn on 4/25/07.



# Lalita Tademy

## Biography continued

While at UCLA, she completed both an undergraduate degree and a master's degree, graduating in 1970 with a B.S. in psychology and obtaining her M.B.A. in business administration in 1972. Over the next twenty years Tademy held management positions with a number of companies, including BART, Memorex, and ITT/Qume. In 1992 she was recruited by Sun Microsystems, a technology firm in Palo Alto, California, where she held the position of vice president. In 1995, despite her prior accomplishments, Tademy was no longer satisfied by her corporate career and resigned from her position as vice president. In an interview with Oprah in 2001 she said of her departure, "[W]hen I walked away from [Corporate America], I think that everybody was surprised. And I know that my mother very specifically was disappointed because she was proud of the position that I had attained. If I had quit that job to go to another job, I think maybe she could have suspended disbelief for a minute. But as it was, she just shook her head. But I felt that I was supposed to be doing something else." (Interview with Lalita Tademy, Oprah.com).

When Tademy left her job, she didn't know what the "something else" was. But she did know that she needed to allow herself time to figure it out, so she allotted herself one year for self-discovery. No longer an executive working eighty-hour weeks, Tademy discovered she was left with many hours of free-time. To occupy this newly acquired time, the former executive began to fill a day or two a week researching her family tree, something in which she had always had an interest in. Soon, Tademy became completely absorbed in genealogy, she found herself bent over books and articles for hours every day.

She embarked upon her research journey and, having exhausted the resources at the National Archives and Records Building in San Bruno, began to travel to Louisiana, where her family originated. There Tademy searched court records, read through old deeds, letters, newspapers, diaries, and wills, and interviewed people with knowledge of the Cane River area. The information she obtained through her research provided Tademy with an abundance of historical background, but she hit a wall when searching for information specific to her ancestors.

Many of the documents she discovered in Louisiana were written in French, so Tademy decided to hire a French-speaking genealogist to aid in her research. Eighteen months later, the genealogist uncovered the bill of sale of three of Tademy's ancestors, which it would prove to be a vital element in the final outcome of her research.



# Lalita Tademy

## Biography continued

Throughout the process of researching her family history, Tademy formed a powerful bond with her maternal ancestors. This bond, and the desire to preserve the history of her family, inspired Tademy to write *Cane River*. In preparation to publish the novel, Tademy wrote two short pieces based on her *Cane River* research, one appearing as an op-ed piece in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the other winning Third Prize in a short story contest. Tademy also enrolled in creative writing classes at Stanford University and the University of California in order to hone her writing skills. After thirteen rejections from various agencies, the author finally connected with an agent who appreciated her work. In 2001, following months of re-writes and reducing the novel's pages from 800 to just over 400, Warner Books published *Cane River*. Soon after its release the novel became an Oprah's Book Club Summer Selection and was discussed during an airing of Oprah's daily talk show.

### Review of *Cane River*

A work of fiction firmly embedded in historical fact, Tademy's debut novel is set on a medium-sized plantation along Cane River in Louisiana. The plantation is owned by a French-speaking family, the Derbannes, who treat their slaves with more care than average slaveowners. The main characters in *Cane River* are based on the lives of the author's maternal ancestors, Elisabeth, Suzette, Philomene, and Emily. Together, their stories span more than a century, beginning in 1834 and ending in 1936. Throughout this time period, the characters endure the hardships of slavery, the Civil War, and the pre-Civil Rights South. In her interview with Oprah, Tademy spoke of her ancestors, "My great grandmother Emily was born a slave in Cane River, just as the Civil War was beginning. Her mother Philomene, and her grandmother Suzette were also born there. Emily's great grandmother Elisabeth came from Virginia, not Louisiana, according to records I found, and she appeared in *Cane River* some time before 1820, when she was still in her teens. *Cane River*, the novel, is an attempt to capture the stories of these remarkable women." (Interview with Lalita Tademy, Oprah.com)

In *Cane River*, Tademy recreates the lives of the incredible women who came before her while addressing many socially significant subjects such as slavery, the role of women in history, and racism. The book is well-organized and illustrated, including a map, pictures, family trees, and copies of historical documents. The weaving together of fact and fiction in *Cane River* allows the characters and places to exist as "real" events and people instead of as mere names and dates.

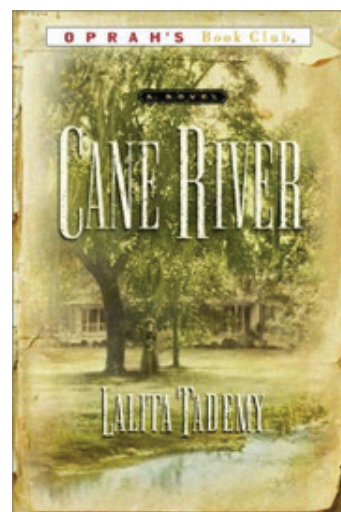


# Lalita Tademy

## Biography continued

### Analysis/Criticism of *Cane River*

Tademy uses her novel to erase misconceptions about the role of African-American women in history and build a foundation for discussion and re-evaluation of that role. Common images and language that come to mind when one is prompted to think about the experiences of Africans and African-Americans throughout the history of the United States may include Kunta Kinte of Alex Haley's *Roots*, or the oppression and lack of choices endured years after the abolition of slavery by Celie of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. One might think of lynching, rape, violence, oppression, and illiteracy. In *Cane River*, Tademy does not seek to tell a similar story. Instead, she reaches beyond the violence and tells the stories of survival, individual identity, and development that took place in the face of oppression. In reconstructing the lives of four generations of her maternal ancestors the author attempts to connect with her past and record the history of her family. Tademy says of her novel, "[It] covers 137 years of my family's history, written as fiction, but deeply rooted in years of research, historical fact, and family lore. There were gaps I filled in based on research of the events and mood of the place and time. I presupposed motivations. I hope I have captured the essence of truth, if not always the precision of fact." (*Cane River* 536)



There is a great amount of detail woven throughout the novel to capture the "essence of truth" and it is important to regard the quantity of research Tademy conducted prior to writing *Cane River* when categorizing or analyzing the text. On a most basic level, the novel is a fictional and sentimental representation of life. However, given that it is based on historical facts and the lives of actual women, and further based on a group which has historically been under-represented, the novel should hold more influence in readers' minds than stories such as those in *Gone with the Wind*. As Tademy points out in her Author's Note, "Emily, back to Philomene, to Suzette and Elisabeth. They were not Mammy or Jezebel or Topsy, the slave images made safe and familiar in *Gone with the Wind*. They were flesh-and-blood women who made hard choices, even in oppression."



# Lalita Tademy

## Biography continued

In her novel, Tademy illustrates the position of the black woman within the structure of family as the glue that holds it together and the energy that keeps it progressing. Mother-daughter relationships are a key theme throughout the book, and although each character maintains her individual identity and strength, each woman also relies on the women in her family for support, both emotional and economical. Through her research, the author uncovered the stories of her maternal ancestors and the stories of other African-American women with similar life-experiences. These stories are a part of U.S. history that has been overshadowed by slavery, a part of history that has been neglected. In her interview with Oprah the author stated, “This is not a book about slavery. This is a story about mothers and daughters. This is a story about relationships.”

More than raising awareness about the hardships of life as a slave, the novel increases awareness that women of all races were oppressed during the era of slavery and the period to follow. The novel also points out that women were strong enough to survive, and make a better life for themselves and their offspring. For centuries, women were left out of science, mathematics, and public discourse, in addition to many other areas. In January of 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation gave African-Americans freedom from slavery. However, more than fifty years later women were still fighting for their rights. Therefore, African-American women during this era had to fight for their rights not once, but two times.

*Cane River* is a work of literature that focuses on the stories of women. This work almost entirely leaves out the experiences of men, so instead of being considered a work of history (his story), *Cane River* can be seen as a work of herstory (her story).

“Herstory” is a term that has developed out of contemporary feminist discourse. This is history told from the perspective of women. Because *Cane River* shares the stories of actual women, this is an exciting example of how the stories of women can influence readers in the present era. By gaining an understanding of the suffering that African-American women faced, we can better understand “her story.”





# Lalita Tademy

## Biography continued

Tademy uses the concept of “her story” to pass on the history of her maternal ancestors, and to bring attention to the role of African-American women in history. Admittedly, Tademy filled in gaps in the documented history of her ancestors with presuppositions. It can be said, however, that a majority of those presuppositions were not based on arbitrary or imaginary information. Comparing the following passage from *Cane River* with an excerpt from the *Slave Narrative of Aunt Mollie Tillman of Alabama*, one can see that the details used to expand the characters in *Cane River* relate closely with details that came directly from those who lived lives that would have been similar to the lives of Tademy’s ancestors. “[S]he was meant for the house, not the field. Everyone, white, colored, and Negro, told her how much pride there was in that.” (*Cane River*, 8) “Honey, I warn’t no common eve’yday slave, I [helped] de white folks in de big house. Dem warz good days, chile; mighty good days. I wuz happy den, but since ‘mancipation I has jes’ had to scuffle an’ work an’ do de bes’ I kin.” (Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938. Aunt Mollie Tillman)

In comparing the similarities between actual accounts of former slaves and fictional accounts of characters in *Cane River* we are confronted with a difference in language and are prompted to engage in discussion of its use in the text. Had dialogue like that in the slave narratives been utilized by the author, the novel would have taken on a tone ineffective in portraying the characters as the author intended. Although keeping true to the language of the time might have added realism to the text, dialogue such as “do de bes’ I kin,” would have made it difficult for Tademy to depict her characters as strong, intelligent women by today’s standards. Thus, the broken language that was likely spoken by Tademy’s ancestors would make it difficult for the reader to believe that these women could accomplish what they did. More than historical accuracy in this aspect of the novel, Tademy sought to illustrate the resourcefulness and strength of her characters.

Also addressed in the novel is a concept Tademy refers to as “bleaching of the line.” She spoke of this subject in her interview with Oprah, “One of the things that really intrigued me and that I didn’t want to sidestep when I wrote this book was my own discomfort with my great-grandmother Emily’s color-struck attitudes, sort of liking people better that were light skinned as opposed to darker skinned.”

Tademy illustrates this in her novel through the generations of women. “Five generations under one roof, all women, in an unbroken sequence, starting with [Elisabeth] and descending down to Angelite. From coffee, to cocoa, to cream, to milk, to lily. A conscious and not-so-conscious bleaching of the line.” (*Cane River* 382).



# Lalita Tademy

## Biography continued

The awareness of the benefits of lighter skin begins to take hold as soon as Philomene is born, and sadly, strengthens throughout the novel. The children are kept out of the sun to keep their skin lighter so they have a better chance of passing as white. Suzette makes sure that Philomene keeps Emily out of the sun because she is “meant for better.” At the end of the book, Emily sits at the front of the bus because she is able to pass for white, as no one on the bus knows her, so she doesn’t need to sit at the back. Tademy addresses this issue pointedly, and expresses her dismay with this aspect of history. Tademy discussed “bleaching of the line” further with Oprah during the Oprah’s Book Club discussion in 2001, Oprah: “When I announced the book, I said specially that it’s about lots of different things, including the whole [issue of] light skin/dark skin [which] runs deeper than I think any of us consciously are aware of on a regular basis.” Tademy: “People said that this [novel] explained to them for the first time what some of the origins of that [issue] might be. And it brought them a little closer to, if not forgiveness, at least understanding.” Oprah: “Understanding that . . . people felt safer, more protected, and that your life would be better based upon the lightness of your skin.” Tademy: “And the possibility of more opportunity.” (*Cane River* discussion, Oprah.com) Through her research Tademy herself began to understand why her ancestors were ‘color-struck,’ and was able to forgive them.

Although the novel is greatly a work of fiction, its factual base demands that the events and characters within its pages be considered with more weight than other fictional works. As with many historical recounts, the writer was unable to obtain the stories the novel is based on first-hand, but through extensive research, was able to give the women a voice through the characters in *Cane River*.

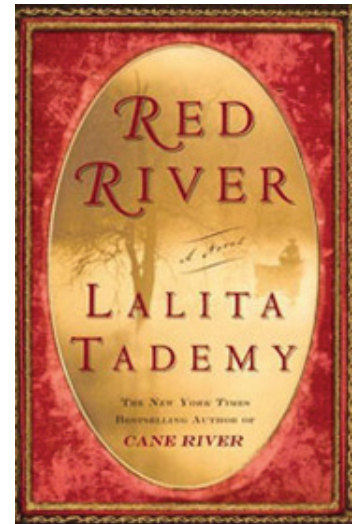
In her second novel, *Red River*, Tademy returns to her family history for inspiration, this time evoking her paternal ancestors. Set in Colfax, Louisiana, *Red River* tells an important, and often overlooked, story about a tragic event that arose from racial tensions during the Reconstruction Era South.



# Lalita Tademy

## Biography continued

The Colfax Massacre occurred on April 13, 1873. During the years surrounding the massacre a paramilitary group called The White League was bent on securing white governance in Louisiana. Spurred by political and racial tensions throughout the state, the group conflicted with Louisiana's near all-black state militia; the resulting death toll was horrifying. More than one hundred black men were killed in the encounter; almost half the murders were done in cold blood after men had already surrendered. Only three white men died in the massacre. Tademy discovered the foundation for *Red River* on a small stone plaque outside the courthouse of Colfax, Louisiana long before she began her research for *Cane River*. The author said in an interview with Hatchett Book Group, "I first discovered that there was such a thing as the Colfax Riot because of the monument in front of the courthouse. I first saw that marker in the 60s. At first, the marker baffled me, and then over the years, it made me angry, and it served its purpose well in driving me toward wanting to know more. The grisly details of the massacre were documented in several different accounts found in public and private records; my goal was to lend them an air of immediacy, not clinical precision" (interview: Lalita Tademy, [hachettebookgroupusa.com](http://hachettebookgroupusa.com)). Similar to her first novel, Tademy's *Red River* brings a little-known part of U.S. history to the masses.



What's on the horizon for the author after getting two novels under her belt? In an interview Tademy said of her writing career, "I believe that my historical fiction days are over, at least for now. I would like to try my hand at a contemporary novel, with the freedom to be totally from my imagination. And in my mother's words, it may just be time to 'stop putting our family business in the street'" (BookReporter.com on January 5, 2007)





# Lalita Tademy

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